

The Real Immigration Debate: Whom to Let In and Why

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The immigration debate in the U.S. has been contentious for decades, but Donald Trump's candidacy and election have taken it to a new level of polarized animosity. Politicians and the public have focused, understandably, on [Mr. Trump's promise](#) to build a "big, beautiful" wall on the U.S.-Mexico border and on what should be done with the millions of illegal immigrants currently in the country.

These are certainly important issues. But they are enforcement issues. They are less fundamental than a question that too often goes unaddressed in our debates: Why limit immigration at all? Almost everyone at least pays lip service to the need for limits of some kind, but we don't often enough challenge each other to explain what limits we support and why.

If we are ever to have a rational debate about immigration—rather than a screaming match among combatants mostly intent on signaling their own moral virtue or ideological purity—the starting point has to be a candid acknowledgment of our goals and preferences. Politicians and ordinary voters shouldn't be allowed to get away with saying "Of course there should be limits on immigration, but..." without explaining what they mean.

Almost all of the arguments for limiting immigration share a common theme: protection. Even those advocating much more liberal immigration policies acknowledge the need to protect Americans from terrorists, foreign criminals and people who pose a threat to public health. Supporters of stricter limits, such as me, seek wider protections: protection for less-skilled workers, protection for the social safety net, and protection for the civic and cultural foundations of American society.

In prior centuries, the vast distances that people had to cross to get to the U.S.—to say nothing of the difficulty of communication and of gathering information about prospects here—proved quite effective at limiting immigration. But now that we can talk to anyone in the world at any time and reach anywhere on the planet in a matter of hours, the oceans no longer pose such a formidable barrier.

[Census data](#) show that more than 43 million foreign-born people are now living in the U.S., close to half of them naturalized citizens. Each year, about 1.5 million new immigrants arrive, most of them legally. But the actual demand for immigration to the U.S. is far higher than these levels.

Even with our current rules, which give out about a million green cards each year (plus hundreds of thousands of work visas), more than four million people are on immigration waiting lists, according to the State Department. And the universe of potential immigrants to the U.S. is much larger still. A 2009 Gallup poll found that [700 million people](#) would permanently leave their countries if they could, with the U.S. as the top choice for some 165 million of them.

Many of these people wouldn't actually follow through, of course, but there is every reason to think that the flow of immigrants to the U.S. would expand enormously if current limits, which are already badly enforced, were to be relaxed or abolished. Under much more liberal rules, immigration to the U.S. could easily reach 10 million people a year.

And what would be wrong with that? What interests of American citizens would warrant protection from much higher levels of immigration?

The most obvious is jobs and workers. Importing large numbers of people from abroad would depress the wages of workers already here. In some cases, Americans would lose their jobs or not get jobs they otherwise would have. Over time, the economy would adjust, absorbing the new workers, but not without significant cost to American workers.

[An authoritative study](#) of the economic effects of immigration, published last year by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, or NAS, provides important context for thinking about the issue. The NAS study found that immigration boosts economic growth in the long term and modestly improves the country's demographic profile as the native population ages. Immigration also creates a small net economic benefit—an “immigration surplus”—of roughly \$50 billion a year, raising the income of the average native-born American by 0.3%.

That net benefit is derived from lowering the wages of Americans who compete with immigrants by about \$500 billion. Businesses, in turn, benefit to the tune of about \$550 billion, resulting in the \$50 billion immigration surplus. In effect, immigration functions as a program of redistribution, shifting wealth from labor to capital.

As the study shows, the native-born workers facing competition from immigrants are mainly those least sought-after by employers: the less-educated, teenagers, recovering addicts, ex-cons, the disabled, single mothers needing flexible hours. The claim that native-born workers don't compete with immigrants because the two groups are in different occupations—“jobs Americans won't do” is the shorthand term—is generally false.

Of the hundreds of categories into which the Census Bureau [classifies American jobs](#), only a half-dozen smaller ones in the data for 2009-11 were majority immigrant, and even in those, nearly half the workers were native-born. Most immigrants were found to be working in sectors where most of their co-workers are native-born. This includes maids, taxi drivers, landscapers, construction laborers and janitors. Janitor cannot logically be a “job Americans won't do” if nearly three-quarters of janitors in the U.S. are native-born Americans.

No specific immigration policy inevitably follows from these facts, but they do help us to see who gets protected by limits on immigration. As Harvard's George Borjas, the nation's leading immigration economist, puts it in his recent book, [“We Wanted Workers,”](#) we need to ask ourselves, “Who are you rooting for?” Are the costs to less-favored native-born workers worth the benefits reaped by those who enjoy the fruits of immigrant labor? Different answers are possible, but the question can't be dodged.

Immigration limits are also designed to protect the social safety net. The late free-market economist Milton Friedman argued that you can't have both relatively open immigration and a generous welfare state. This is because large-scale immigration, whether under current arrangements or more permissive rules, attracts large numbers of less-skilled workers, who will only be able to earn low wages. These low wages mean, in turn, that they would pay little in taxes but are eligible for many means-tested government benefits.

Friedman's preference was to abolish the welfare state rather than to limit immigration, but in the real world, no such thing is possible. Some form of extensive social provision for the poor is an inherent part of modern society. Tightening is possible, but simply eliminating it is not.

The progression from little education to low wages to high welfare use is not a moral critique of immigrants. Our welfare system is designed to subsidize the working poor with children, and immigrants are the working poor with children. My center's analysis of data from a 2012 Census Bureau survey focusing on “program participation” (that is, welfare use) showed that 51% of

households headed by immigrants use at least one means-tested welfare program. The most widely used are Medicaid and the nutrition programs (food stamps, the WIC nutritional program, school lunches), which immigrants use at nearly double the rate of the native-born.

This safety net would buckle under the weight of much higher levels of immigration. Even our current flow of 1.5 million immigrants a year creates a significant fiscal deficit. The aforementioned NAS study examined these costs—the balance between services used and taxes paid by immigrants and their dependent children—and found immigrants to be a net fiscal drain, with the loss as large as \$299 billion a year.

There is no avoiding the reality that admitting large numbers of poor people into the U.S. inevitably creates costs for taxpayers. As with the effect of immigration on the labor market, no specific policy follows from these facts, but they clearly show the impact of decisions about immigration limits.

Finally, limits on immigration also protect the stability of our social arrangements. To be successful and harmonious, any society needs to cultivate a sense of fellow-feeling and solidarity among its members. Most of our fellow citizens are strangers to us, and yet we tax ourselves for their benefit, yield to their political choices at election time and perhaps serve in uniform to protect them. We do this precisely because they are our fellow citizens and have a claim on our loyalty and affections that citizens of other countries do not.

In more homogenous societies, like Japan or Denmark or Swaziland, this fellow-feeling may arise organically from kinship ties and a shared cultural heritage. But in a more heterogeneous society like ours, it must be cultivated if it is to flourish, and we can't ignore factors that undermine it.

This is not to say that immigrants don't learn English, get jobs, join the military and drive on the right side of the road. They do all those things. But the deeper and more important process of reorienting one's emotional and psychological attachments from the old country to the new has not fared well in recent decades in the U.S. and would be overwhelmed, I believe, by any dramatic increase in immigration.

In "Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation," a classic study published in 2001, the sociologists Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut followed thousands of children of immigrants in San Diego and Miami over several years, surveying them when they began high school and then again as they were finishing. Their research covered many issues, including the students' national self-identification.

At the beginning of high school, the majority identified as American in some form, either simply or in some hyphenated form as, say, a Filipino-American or Cuban-American. After several years of American high school, the primary institution tasked with imparting civic consciousness to young people, barely one-third still identified as American, with most adopting either a foreign national identity (Cuban or Filipino) or a pan-racial identity (Hispanic, Asian). Our educational system continues to do an abysmal job at civic education, not least because of the influence of multiculturalism as a pedagogical principle.

These problems aside, modern society is marked by the loss of what the Harvard political scientist Robert Putman calls social capital. As he showed in his influential book "Bowling Alone" (2000) and in his subsequent research, this decline in connections among individuals and in social trust manifests itself in many areas: falling membership in unions, civic organizations

and professional societies, declining church attendance, less participation in politics, even a drop in having friends over for dinner.

This social atomization wasn't caused by immigration, but it has two important implications for it. First, the institutions that in the past helped to assimilate immigrants into American life are not what they once were. Unions, churches, urban political machines, even broad-based ethnic self-help organizations either no longer exist or are have been significantly enfeebled.

In addition, [Dr. Putnam's research](#) shows that high levels of immigration actually exacerbate the bowling-alone tendencies in the wider society, overloading it with ethnic diversity than it cannot handle. It is not that diversity causes increased hostility between groups, as one might expect. Rather, it causes people to disappear into their shells like turtles. As Dr. Putnam writes: "Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more but to have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television."

It is no coincidence that Los Angeles, which immigration has made into what Dr. Putnam calls "among the most ethnically diverse human habitations in history," had the lowest level of social trust among all the communities that his team studied.

So if there must be limits on immigration, for these or other reasons, what should those limits be? That depends on what you think needs protecting and how much protection you think it needs.

My own primary concerns are the stagnating prospects of much of our workforce, the dysfunction of our public finances and the fragility of our civic culture. This leads me to advocate much narrower criteria than those we currently use. I would limit immigration to the husbands, wives and young children of U.S. citizens; to skilled workers who rank among the top talents in the world; and to the small number of genuine refugees whose situation is so extraordinary that they cannot be helped where they are.

Others will reach different conclusions, but they must address the same questions: What family relationships should give rise to special immigration rights? How should skills be determined? And given the misery that prevails in so much of the world, what should the limiting principle be for admitting refugees?

If we can get politicians, analysts and the public to grapple with these questions and answer them forthrightly, we can have a cooler, more reasoned immigration debate. There will still be much disagreement—over what the limits should be and how they should be enforced—but we will at least know where everyone stands.

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